Preface

This book presents a critique of, and an alternative to, the received view of the nature of linguistic communication. According to the received view, the function of language is to enable speakers to reveal the propositional contents of their thoughts to hearers. So conceived, linguistic communication involves two kinds of meanings. First, there are the meanings that speakers express. These are the propositional contents of the thoughts that speakers intend to reveal to hearers. Second, there are the meanings that words possess. By virtue of these, a speaker's words express a complete proposition in the context in which they are uttered. Typically, a hearer will recognize the proposition that the speaker's words express in light of their meanings and the context and may infer that the meaning that the speaker expresses is that same proposition.

According to me, it is a mistake to try to explain linguistic communication in terms of meanings of these two kinds. No one has ever explained what having a propositional content in mind consists in, and such a conception of communication stands in the way of a correct account of a great

variety of linguistic phenomena. Talk of meaning is one of the devices by which conversation is conducted, and we need to understand that kind of talk along with the rest, but the concept of meaning will play no role in a fundamental theory of how language works.

Others before me have balked at the concept of meaning as well (Wittgenstein 1953, Quine 1960, Davidson 1967, Kripke 1982, Schiffer 1987), but they have not succeeded in putting much of anything positive in its place. The primary value of the theory of meaning was that it seemed to offer us a set of linguistic norms. The theory of meaning tells us basically that we should strive to speak in such a way that what we mean is what another user of the language would think we meant judging by the meanings of our words and the context. If we give up on the theory of meaning, then we need an alternative approach to the norms of discourse; that is what I offer in this book.

The basic tools of my alternative are these: First, there are objective contexts. These are constituted by what is relevant to the goals of the interlocutors given the state of the world around them. They are objective in that interlocutors may be mistaken about the content of these contexts. Second, in precisely definable ways, some sentences will be assertible in such a context and others will not be. Of the assertible ones, some will go without saying and others not. The obligation of a speaker is to assert what is assertible if it does not go without saying. Using these tools, I will offer solutions to many outstanding problems in the philosophy of language.

I have discussed many of the topics of this book with Frank Döring and Marina Sbisà. I have discussed selected issues with Kees van Deemter, Kai von Fintel, Adam Morton, Zoltán Gendler Szabó, Tadeusz Zawidzki, Jonathan Berg, and Arthur Morton. Adam Morton, Michael Glanzberg, and Marina Sbisà read a draft of the entire manuscript, making many helpful suggestions. Countless others have pushed me along through e-mail correspondence and conversation at conferences. I thank them all for their help and their indulgence. Thanks too to Tom Stone, of MIT Press, and Peter Ludlow, the series editor, for recognizing the value of my work. The semantic theory of "believes" in chapter 12 was inspired by a paper by Walter Edelberg (1995). As always, my greatest debt is to my wife, Alice Youngsook Kim.

Chapters 4 through 10 and 12 are based largely on articles published elsewhere (1997a, 1997b, 1998, 2001b, forthcoming b, forthcoming c), but I have taken only a few brief passages out of those works verbatim.